

Natick Bulletin & Tab

Coalition Combines Efforts to Promote Cochituate Rail Trail Proposal

By **Emily Shartin**, TAB Staff Writer

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On his daily commute from Framingham to Precision Digital in Natick, Bill Hanson often finds himself facing the automotive gridlock of Route 9.

But instead of sitting in traffic and wallowing in the fumes of stagnant cars, Hanson zips by frustrated car-bound commuters, pedaling his way to work on his bicycle. Equipped with studded snow tires, Hanson can ride his bike through the winter months, and thus make a year-round contribution to cutting down on the number of cars glutting area roads.

"I'm sure everybody agrees we could use less automobile traffic," Hanson said.

Hanson, chairman of the Framingham Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee, and other avid cyclists are uniting this week in observance of National Bike Week. Local riders can join George Eckert, chairman of the Natick Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee, on an off-road ride beginning at 6 p.m. on the Middlesex Path, which runs parallel to Route 135 in Natick. Participants should meet - with helmets - at the Middlesex Path parking lot on Route 135 across from Fisk Pond.

Tomorrow night, the NBPAC will lead a 10-mile ride and a 20-mile ride beginning at 6 p.m. at the Natick Town Common. In addition, early risers can stop by the common between 6 and 9 a.m. this week for information and assorted prizes.

This year's Bike Week celebration also ties into an ongoing local effort by a coalition of committees to convert an old four-mile railroad line running from downtown Natick to Saxonville in northern Framingham into the Cochituate Rail Trail, which could be used for walking, jogging, biking and in-line skating.

Aside from exercise possibilities, supporters say the Cochituate Rail Trail would offer area residents easy access to Shoppers World, the General Cinemas theater and the Natick Mall. It also would allow commuters the opportunity to get to work "intermodally" by riding or walking down the trail into Natick and getting onto the T, never once setting foot into a car.

"It's more than a cute path in the woods," said Craig Della Penna, New England representative for the Rails to Trails Conservancy, a national organization dedicated to creating public rail trails.

Trails, Della Penna said, connect people without the use of autos, which is a primary objective of those interested in transit issues.

"There is that tendency to ignore other modes of transportation [besides cars]," said State Rep. John Stasik, who lives near the trailhead in Saxonville and has long championed alternative transportation methods.

The proposal for the Cochituate Rail Trail built up a good head of steam in early 1998 when Natick learned that Wonder Bread, which uses the rail line, planned to vacate its property on Speen Street.

Seeing that the primary customer of the rail would be leaving, Natick resident Karl Schlemmer wrote to selectmen requesting a feasibility study of the bike trail proposal. Cathy Buckley Lewis, bicycle/pedestrian coordinator for the Central Transportation Planning Staff, is in the early stages of compiling that study.

However, although Wonder Bread will leave Natick in June, the rail line is still used by a cold storage facility. Because the rail line is abandoned above Route 30, Framingham does not have to contend with the same issues that Natick does.

Although Lewis recognized that it probably would be a while before the Natick rail line was abandoned, she said that looking at the feasibility of this project now is not a waste of energy.

"If this ever does become available, then the towns of Framingham and Natick will know whether they want to go forward or not," she said. Lewis added that the towns will have to consider the initial intention of the rail trail - a link between Saxonville, the malls and downtown Natick - and decide whether proceeding with only the Framingham portion of the project would make sense.

The rail originates in downtown Natick just off Middlesex Avenue, and runs northwest along Route 27 toward Route 9. This portion of the rail cuts through a residential neighborhood near the Natick Labs, which may eventually raise concerns with abutters.

"Sometimes there's angst beforehand," said Della Penna. Resident reaction to rail trail proposals is often mixed because of the increased neighborhood traffic trails bring, he explained. But Della Penna knows of no community that has ever ultimately regretted the construction of such a trail.

The Cochituate rail runs between two of Lake Cochituate's ponds as it crosses over Route 9 on a bridge. Poison ivy and brush crowd the trail as it makes its way up through Saxonville, but this wild growth presents little obstacle to those Framingham residents who are optimistic about the prospect of building the rail in their neck of the woods.

The FBPAC has received support from the Friends of Saxonville, a local group that is also in the process of establishing two walking trails of its own near the Cochituate Rail, according to member and former Stapleton School Principal Carol Getchell.

"It just seemed to be a natural extension," Getchell said of the Cochituate Rail Trail project.

Getchell also said that a developer who intends to revamp a building across the street from the proposed trailhead in Saxonville is excited about the projects, and has talked about installing bike racks, benches and water fountains outside the building.

Stasik, a founder of the Friends of Saxonville, said he supports the rail trail project, but is also interested in the possibility of using the rail to create a path for a van or a bus connection between Framingham and Natick, which ties into his proposal to use the Wonder Bread property as a transportation center linking various modes of local transit. But depending on the width of the rail line's right-of-way, Stasik feels one project would not usurp the other, and that it would be possible to create a van line alongside a bicycle/walking trail.

Hanson said he realizes it may take awhile before the rail trail project takes definite shape and moves forward. By comparison, the Minuteman Commuter Bikeway, which links Arlington and Bedford, took 21 years to complete. But in the end, Hanson thinks it will be worth it.

"We can be patient," he said.

Some are predicting Natick will have to be even more patient before its portion of the trail can be completed.

"The process is really slow," said Eckert, who has been involved with the NBPAC for two years. He feels that because the railroad in Natick is not abandoned, cycling and alternative transportation activists should channel their energies into other projects for now.

"The railroad is still using the line. End of discussion," he said. Della Penna agreed that as ownership of the rail line is transferred next month, alternative uses for the line will likely not be high on the CSX list of priorities.

Eckert prefers to concentrate on more feasible - but equally important - bicycle projects in Natick for the time being.

"We should work on things that can be attained," he said. He is interested in maintaining and expanding the Middlesex Path, a woodsy trail that runs between the MBTA rail line and Route 135. He also would like the town to work on widening road shoulders and keeping them free of sand and other debris. Natick Community Development Director Sarkis Sarkisian said the town has ordered bike racks to be installed outside town hall, at the T station and at Moran Park in Natick. It is important, Eckert said, that towns keep these seemingly small accommodations in mind.

"The more links we build, the more people we can get into cycling," he said.

But in addition to an increased recognition of bicycle concerns, other activists are convinced that they will see the realization of the Cochituate Rail Trail. Cochituate State Park Advisory Vice Chairman A. Richard Miller, who has been working with local designer Steve Broadley to develop maps and plans for the trail, feels that rail owners will see that once Wonder Bread is gone, there will be little economic incentive to maintaining the line for freight transport.

The rail owners, Miller said, are "confounding a major benefit for a minor one."

Della Penna rates the Cochituate Rail Trail as one of the top rail projects currently under development in Massachusetts, mainly because of its transportation possibilities. Another trail that has recently received attention in MetroWest is the Upper Charles Trail, which would link Holliston, Sherborn,

Framingham, Ashland, Hopkinton and Milford. Holliston Town Meeting recently approved funding for the first phase of this project.

But Della Penna also said it could take anywhere from two to 10 years before plans, pavement, walkers, bikers and in-line skaters fall into place on the Cochituate line.

"You always have to take the long view in building bike paths," Della Penna said.

Whether or not the Cochituate Rail Trail ever comes to fruition, local committees will continue to advocate for pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly town policies, with the ultimate goal of getting people to consider transportation in a new light.

"We do a lot looking at things from a different perspective," said Hanson. The FBPAC encourages the maintenance and reconstruction of a number of crosswalks in Framingham, and persuades residents to guard against bike theft by registering their bikes with the police department. Miller said that, after persistent petitioning, business owners at Shoppers World have agreed to install bike racks in front of their stores. The NBPAC also will hold weekly rides around the area for anyone interested in some early-evening exercise.

The bottom line is that area bicycle activists are passionate about their hobby, to the point that one might even start to refer to it as something more, perhaps a way of life. These cyclists hope to encourage area residents to develop an interest in bicycles that will last long after National Bike Week comes to a close.

"From my standpoint, every week is bike week," Hanson said.

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